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ABSTRACT

A truly interactive approach in the classroom involves giving students the freedom to add their own "twist" to course materials and allowing them to decide to some degree how the information will be used. Two learning activities employed in a psychology course serve to illustrate how interactive techniques can encourage students to relate their own experience to course material. The first activity helps students understand the biased impressions individuals hold about one another. Students are asked to make a collage of images that represent their perceptions of who they are. Next, students ask someone who knows them well to make a similar collage. The assignment concludes with an essay, based on at least eight questions provided by the instructor, analyzing the differences between the two collages. The second activity is designed to understand the somewhat confusing concept of defense mechanisms as outlined by Freud and other psychologists. A group of student volunteers work out skits to demonstrate various defense mechanisms, while the remaining students write brief papers on the same topic. The volunteers then present the skits, and the class must decide which defense mechanism is being demonstrated. Interactive approaches to classroom activities present a means for instructors to move students beyond simple factual and content-based information, engaging them in ways that standard lectures do not. Sample collage questions are included. (MAB)

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Helping Students to Experience the Classroom: Interactive Techniques for the Personality Psychology Course

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Running Head: Interactive Techniques in the Classroom

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Paper presented at the 9th Annual Conference on Undergraduate Teaching of Psychology: Ideas & Innovations, Ellenville, New York, March 1995.

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Abstract

Teaching personality psychology can provide the faculty member with a variety of interesting opportunities and challenges. At a recent conference on assessment, a faculty member asked why students are so obsessed with relating personal and family experiences into their writing. The response from another faculty member was both shocking and disturbing. In response a colleague stated, "it's just another technique they try to use to get away with not doing the reading. If they can B.S. enough about what they know, they think you won't figure out what they don't know". Although this sentiment may be tempting at times when it seems that all of our efforts to get students involved with their coursework have failed, I find the pessimism both undeserved and disquieting. I have come to the philosophy that students will rise to the educational standards that we set for them but only when a path by which those standards can be achieved has been illuminated. What follows is a description of two "interactive" techniques that I use that encourage students to relate their own personal and life histories to the material. Rather than cringing when students try to relate the material to what they know best, then, I encourage them to process the material at their own level and, in so doing, give them a path by which their competency with the material can be demonstrated.

Many students enroll in psychology courses for the express purpose of figuring out their lives or the lives of a loved one. Although I do not advocate that such a purpose should be the guiding point by which our psychology courses are structured, I also do not believe that we should sweep such a point under the rug and pretend it doesn't exist. Taking the theoretical approach in the classroom is nothing new. Indeed, many faculty members feel that personality psychology should be taught as a theoretically based course. But theories, alone, do not portray personality psychology to the students. If they did, students would ask a lot fewer questions than they do about how this relates to people they know and/or the behaviors they have seen this person engage in. Rather than chastising students for such personal reflections, however, I advocate embracing this personal interest and turning it to the student's educational advantage.

Many educators advocate an "interactional" approach to the classroom trying to create teaching techniques that involve students in the classroom experience. But how "interactive" are these techniques? Interacting with someone or something does not just mean giving the student a more memorable way of learning the facts. It also does not mean creating a fun way of learning the same old things. True interaction in the classroom involves giving students the freedom to add their own twist to the material and allowing them to decide (to some degree, anyway) how that information will be used. But interactive techniques are not for the faint at heart. Nor are such techniques suggested for the faculty member who feels he/she must be in "control" of the classroom at all times. When students create the examples that allow them to understand the material, though, learning can be significantly enhanced and simple content errors can be better avoided.

To demonstrate how an interactive approach to the classroom that encourages students to think about themselves and others that they know works, let's consider the following issues:

1.) Getting students to understand the biased impressions individuals hold about each other.

2.) Helping students to understand the somewhat confusing defense mechanisms as outlined by Freud and others.

Method

Technique One

Implicit Personality Theories often dominate our thinking and influence not only our views of others but our views of ourselves (Schneider, 1973). What is often surprising for students, however, is the fact that others make assumptions about them as well. It is one thing to know that we hold particular views about our own selves and quite another to ponder the fact that others may have very specific beliefs about our selves as well. Aiding student understanding of the different assumptions that others may be making of them helps the student understand the importance of various social psychological concepts including "Social Theory" (Anderson & Sechler, 1986) as well. Such a theory is used by the individual to make assumptions about the manner in which certain environmental variables go together. These theories, then, can combine to dramatically influence the impressions individual hold about themselves and others.

To aid student comprehension of the sometimes important differences between their own self views and others' views of their self, I employ the Personality Collage. Students are instructed to collect magazine and

newspaper pictures, comics, headlines, advertisements, and such that they believe reflect who they are. These are then to be placed on a piece of poster board in the form of a collage. Students are given no other guidelines about format, placement of items, etc. Their final requirement is to put together a collage that visually demonstrates for others who they think they are.

Students are also instructed to ask someone who they think knows them quite well to construct a collage of their personality. In this fashion, the student will have two collages of their own self. One that is self created and one that is created by someone who they believe knows their self about as well as they do. The final step in the project is to require students to compare and contrast the two collages and write a paper that summarizes the collages and what they have learned from them. To facilitate student understanding, eight guiding questions are provided. Papers that are turned in with the collages then, are expected to include discussion of at least these eight questions.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Grading these collages could be considered to be a risky business. The risk, however, can be minimized if the faculty member remembers the purpose and nature of the assignment. Students are not only encouraged but required to reflect on their self. As such, the collages themselves should not be graded. Instead I have found it quite useful to give a certain number of points just for turning both collages in. Then, the remainder of the points (usually half or more) comes from grading the paper. The paper should be both reflective in terms of self and others but should also reflect the student's learning of the course material. As such, papers should be graded for

inclusion of theories, issues, and concepts relevant to the material as covered in the class.

Technique Two

Students have problems understanding some of the subtle differences between some of the defense mechanisms that are covered when discussing Freudian theory. Although I have tried dozens of techniques to simplify this material and, thereby, aid their understanding, none have worked better than the interactive technique I call "What's my defense mechanism?" Students are divided into small work groups (no more than three to five works best) and given handouts that briefly describe some of the major defense mechanisms (including; compensation, displacement, identification, projection, rationalization, reaction formation, repression, sublimation). As most teachers of personality psychology will attest, students confuse many of these. Most notably students have difficulty understanding the difference between Compensation and Sublimation or between Displacement and Projection.

In this interactive technique, students volunteer to serve as actors/actresses and are sent to another room to work on an act that will demonstrate a particular defense mechanism. While they are preparing their acts, students remaining in the room are asked to write a short thought paper discussing the concept of defense mechanisms and examples from their own life in which they have used some of them. After the acting students return, they play out the scenarios they have created. The task of the remaining student groups, then, is to discuss the scenario with other group members and write down which defense mechanism they feel each scenario attempted to depict. After the students have reached decisions about each scene, their

work is checked by the students who acted the scenarios out. This, of course, opens the scenes up for discussion in which students make many references to their personal experiences and how those experiences either helped them in their efforts to label the scene or hindered such efforts.

Discussion

It is important that the faculty member be willing to allow students the opportunity to learn from their own personal lives. Who do students know better than themselves? Cognitive psychologists certainly would agree that individuals process information and learn better when that information can be incorporated with what the individual already knows. Given the expanse of knowledge individuals hold about themselves and the loved ones in their lives, is it really any surprise that they would make efforts to integrate new information with schemas they have already formed about persons they know? Rather than demoralizing students for such activities and feeding the philosophy that such a technique is, inherently, an attempt by students to avoid the real work, I encourage students to use such personal reflection and interaction with the material profitably. At the same conference that sparked the comment about students using personal reflection because of laziness, I felt compelled to ask the faculty member who found such personal reflection repulsive why he found it so problematic. His response was as shocking as his original question.

"It makes it difficult for me to decipher exactly what they do and do not know."

"What knowledge is it that you want them to demonstrate?", I further inquired.

"I want them to show me that they know what I told them."

That last statement, I believe, gets to the real heart of the matter. Unless a faculty member wants a student to go beyond the material, an interactive technique is probably not a good idea. Students who try to relate material to their own lives and who are encouraged to interact with it will, invariably, ask questions that go beyond the simple factual and content-based information you have presented. As such, the faculty member must be open to allowing the discussion to become more expansive and take on broader issues that just spitting back a definition or repeating a sentence from the lecture.

Certainly the two examples presented here are just that - examples. Many different courses and concepts lend themselves well to an interactional classroom approach. Perhaps more than anything, however, using such techniques demonstrates a teaching philosophy to the student that can broaden his or her understanding of why you think the material is important. We all know that using the "do as I say and not as I do" parenting philosophy produces less than stellar results. It is not a far stretch from that to realizing that students will probably not respond well to an "you need to know it because I said so" teaching philosophy either. We know things we have experienced better than we know things we have only heard about. Why should knowledge from the classroom be any different? Engaging students in the classroom experience, then, is not only a welcome break from the traditional lecture format. It also can significantly enhance student understanding and retention of the material we have worked so hard to prepare. What better philosophy for the business of teaching than one from which everyone profits?

Table 1

Questions to Discuss as You Consider the Similarities and Differences Between the Two Collages

1.) What are some of the major themes about your "self" depicted in your collage? What are the major themes about your "self" depicted in the second collage?

2.) What are the major similarities between your version and your partner's version of your "self"?

3.) What are the major differences between your version and your partner's version of your "self"?

4.) How did these differences make you feel?

5.) What might you be able to do to eliminate some of these differences? Would you want to eliminate them? Why or why not?

6.) What have these differences taught you about yourself that you didn't already know?

7.) What have these differences taught you about your partner that you didn't already know?

8.) Describe any key concepts from the theorists, theories and concepts covered in this course that you think relate to either of the collages.

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